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Reagan Intelligence Agenda

As the Reagan administration takes office, the area in which the most sweeping changes take place may be that of intelligence. The president-elect has received recommendations for drastic innovations on intelligence from his own transition team and from the Heritage Foundation, a conservative organization whose report was said to have been favorably accepted by top Reagan aide Edwin Meese.

The transition team recommended, among other things, an enhanced role and increased financing for covert activities abroad; the establishment of a "central file" on suspected foreign agents and Americans with whom they deal in order to enhance counter-intelligence activities; the establishment of a competitive system of intelligence analysis. The analysis proposal, designed merely to improve the quality of intelligence by forcing different agencies to defend their conclusions, is one of the few proposals that would be benign in effect. The other recommendations of the transition team and those of the Heritage Foundation present a chilling perspective.

For example, the Heritage Foundation proposed stepped-up surveillance of domestic dissident groups, including "anti-defense and anti-nuclear lobbies"; removal of restrictions on mail-openings, wiretapping and in some cases break-ins by the FBI; exemption of the FBI from the Privacy Act and of all intelligence branches from the Freedom of Information Act; restoration of the attorney general's list of subversive organizations; reinstitution of a loyalty program for government employees. Such recommendations, if implemented, would permit a wholesale undermining of the constitutional guarantees enunciated in the Bill of Rights, especially the rights of free

speech and association and the protection against unreasonable searches and seizure.

Before instituting the proposed intelligence changes, the Reagan administration should consider some recent history. The Nixon administration's use of intelligence machinery against people whom it considered to be domestic radicals helped to create the deep divisiveness of the Vietnam War era. Its misuse of the CIA and the FBI were part of the trauma of Watergate and figured in the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment charges against President Nixon. At an earlier time, the attorney general's list of so-called subversive organizations and the loyalty program (eventually invalidated in large part by the Supreme Court) were an integral part of the demoralizing period in which the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy created widespread fear and mistrust among Americans by smearing dissenters as communists or communist sympathizers. The CIA's covert action to overthrow an Iranian government in 1953 is at the root of the difficulties between Iran and the U.S. today. Covert action against an elected Chilean government in the early 1970s led to profound suspicion of Washington in parts of Latin America.

On such matters as economic policies and the size of the bureaucracy, Mr. Reagan may fairly say that the election victories of Republicans constitute a mandate for change. But changes that subvert the Bill of Rights and the integrity of government should not be partisan matters. Conservatives have as much interest in avoiding invasions of privacy and in protecting free speech as do liberals. The serious weakening of such values would be a high price to pay for the hoped-for benefits of better intelligence.